

The Blessing of Babel (Noach)

“There are incalculable resources in the human spirit, once it has been set free.” –Hubert Humphrey

After the cataclysm of The Flood, the descendants of Noah congregated in the plains of Shinar within the Fertile Crescent and built a city. A city with a tower that reached for the heavens. It was meant to be a city for all mankind, where all of humanity could be united in peace and harmony in one place. God however, had other plans. He confused the languages of the idealistic builders which led to the dispersion of mankind across the face of the Earth. The structure became known as the Tower of Babel and it was never completed.

Most Rabbinic commentators view the effort of the Tower of Babel as one of hubris, of man reaching to compete with God, to supplant God. They view the dispersion as a punishment. Ibn Ezra has a different take.

Ibn Ezra (on Genesis 11:3) feels that there was no sin in the construction of the Tower, and neither was there a punishment. Man in his youthful idealism sought to unite all people. To unite them around a physical structure that could be perceived by all. To keep the people concentrated in one place. Not to have divisions, or borders, or geographic differences, or national allegiances. They wished for a utopian unity of all people. There was no sin in these goals – they just weren't what God planned for mankind – certainly not at that stage of history.

God wanted Man to cover the Earth, to reach for the peaks of Everest and the plains of the Serengeti, to spread and divide, to form tribal and national identities, to have unique sub-groupings of families and peoples, to diversify and differentiate. God did not want a world of people with the same language, thoughts, opinions, and tastes. He wanted a pageant of ideas, a cacophony of voices, a symphony of traditions. The dispersion of the Tower of Babel was not a punishment. It was a blessing.

It has given us a world full of color, and sound, and discovery, and delight, in almost every corner of the globe. Imagine how much poorer we'd all be, if we were still congregated in some megalopolis, looking up at a tower in the plains of southern Iraq?

Thank God, He kicked us out of there.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To my nephew, Azriel Zechariah Tocker, on his Bar-Mitzvah. Mazal Tov!